



Your best intentions can become effective intercessions for your children or grandchildren. Trade your lists of requests for Scripturally-based prayers that will immerse you in God's promises and will. *A Practical Guide for Praying Parents* will help you pray scriptural prayers that bring you closer to God and bless your children.

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Lord, Change *Me*

Our first prayer as parents should be, “Lord, change *me!*” “Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!” (Ps. 139:23–24).

One year, for four Wednesday nights at The Moody Church, we announced special prayer meetings that we called POPs (Parents of Prodigals). Not only did we double our prayer meeting attendance, we also had extended times of earnest prayer, with weeping and agonizing before God. We did not see a lot of immediate results, but months and even years later I heard testimonies that God had heard and responded. *We prayed prayers that God is still answering even today!*

Is it always the parent’s fault if a child goes astray? No, it is not. I’ve known many fine and loving parents who have experienced heartache due to children who have left the faith and

wandered in the world, experiencing one bitter consequence after another. Divorce, abortion, addiction, and anger have followed them. The father in the parable of the prodigal was not at fault for the rebellion of his younger son. There are some parents who feel guilty, blaming themselves for their child's wrong choices. That is false guilt.

Someone has said, we stand in the presence of two mysteries: the evil of the human heart and the mystery of divine providence. Before Isaac's wife, Rebekah, gave birth to twins, God said, "Yet I have loved Jacob but Esau I have hated" (Mal. 1:2-3). Same mother, same father, but two different destinies.

Often, the choices made by children are not the fault of the parents.

But the interviews at our prayer meetings confirmed that parents often create the environment that spawns the rebellion of their child. So, during those prayer meetings at The Moody Church I would ask, "What is God teaching *you* through your children? And, how might *you* have contributed to their struggles and harmful choices?" Then we would talk about what could be done to redeem the past and pray with hope for the future.

God speaks to us through our children even if they are not rebellious. How vividly I remember, about twenty years ago when I was busy studying the Bible and church history, one of our daughters who was in college said, "Dad, I'm finding it difficult to compete with Martin Luther for time with you!" An

arrow right to my heart! A powerful reminder that my priorities were out of whack. Today I am so grateful that our three daughters and our sons-in-law are all walking with God, but I have to admit that as our daughters were growing up, they exposed my selfishness, wrong priorities, and weaknesses.

THE BLESSING OF RECEIVING A BLESSING

Have you blessed your children? In their bestselling book *The Blessing*, Gary Smalley and John Trent explain the emotional baggage that many children carry because they have never had the blessing of their parents. They grow up without the approval and welcome of their parents. Jesus said, “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me” (Matt. 18:5). But many children are born into homes where they are received in the name of necessity; this is particularly true of children conceived out of wedlock who are perceived as a burden rather than a blessing. Single mothers who are angry with their child’s father often overcorrect their children with unacknowledged resentment. The child knows he isn’t really wanted; he’s seen as a nuisance, not a special treasure who can depend on the acceptance of his parents. Remember, as is often said, whatever we don’t forgive, we pass on.

In their book *The Gift of Blessing*, Gary Smalley and John Trent say there are five ways family members, particularly parents, can bless their children:

1. meaningful touch
2. a spoken message
3. attaching high value to the one being blessed
4. picturing a special future for the one being blessed
5. an active commitment to fulfill the blessing²

They would agree that if only we were to spend less time *correcting* children and more time *connecting* with them, we would give them an important sense of self-worth and inner fulfillment. There's no substitute for a child being able to delight a parent by sitting on their knees being hugged and enjoyed. Let us commit to giving our children encouragement and the assurance that they are loved and valuable. And, there are more ways than one that the older generation can bless the younger.

I was born into a home where we as children knew that our parents loved us and cared for our well-being. When my father was one hundred years old (he died at 106), Rebecca suggested that I have my father bless me. So with his permission I knelt before him, and he laid his hands on me and prayed an earnest prayer that I will never forget. Let me make this suggestion: if your father is still living and is a Christian, ask him for a special blessing. If not, you might ask an older relative to give you a special blessing. My point is simply this: in an age of the fragmentation of our culture and the breakup of our families, children especially need to feel wanted and

valuable. And even older children can receive a special blessing given by some respected adult.

If your child is alive, it is not too late to bless them! Whether at home or away, either directly or with a phone call, give a word of encouragement and hope to your child. Since Jesus is not physically present to bless our children, we are given that privilege. Blessing our children can be one of the ways God fulfills our prayers.

Later, I will suggest a special prayer of blessing for your child.

PARENTS OF PRODIGALS

I believe there are two kinds of parents that often spawn prodigals: parents who are self-righteous, and those who lose their moral authority through their own failures and hypocrisies. Then there are some who have both faults.

Let's talk about the strict, self-righteous parent who believes the key to having good children is by insisting on rigid obedience, high standards, and legalistic rules and regulations. Many times, these expectations are enforced by over-correction or even abuse. Children in such homes grow up with resentment, often rebelling against the strictness of their parents or church. They long for the day when they can spurn their family, church, and God. Their pent-up anger is waiting to be unleashed.

What's gone wrong? Many parents think that knowledge always results in obedience and that rules motivate the children to develop behavioral patterns that they will follow for the rest of their lives. Of course, knowledge and rules are important, but many legalistic parents neglect a positive emotional connection with their child. They would be wise to heed the mantra of ministry leader and author Josh McDowell: "Rules without relationship leads to rebellion." As we shall see, we are driven not by the mind, but by the heart.

In the early 1970s, a Michigan church was experiencing a revival; its members were repenting of their sins and families were being reconciled to God. One church member returned from a Saturday morning golf game and saw two hundred men on their knees confessing their sins. This latecomer shook his fist and said, "God, you will never get me!"

Why did he say that? Because he had five sons and a hot temper. He later admitted that he frequently over-disciplined his sons, often inconsistently. He knew that if "God got him," he would have to apologize to his sons for how he had wronged them. At that moment, it was a price too high for this proud man who always saw himself as "being right" about everything. But when the conviction of sin was overwhelming, "God got him," and he humbly went to his sons and asked for their forgiveness.

I have discovered that children who are brought up with strict, self-righteous parents are often the hardest to win back

to the faith. They are fed up, angry, and are enjoying freedom for the first time. They are not about to be brought again under “the yoke of bondage,” which neither they, nor their self-righteous parents, are able to bear.

As a pastor I’ve often tried to help people see that they have to repent of their self-righteousness. I’ve learned that it’s easier for us to repent of obvious sins than it is to repent of self-righteousness. The self-righteous person is almost incapable of admitting to his sin or guilt. He strives for perfection, believing he’s come as close as anyone to attaining that goal. Others have to repent, but he doesn’t. He is “right,” and that’s all that counts. And because he refuses to see himself for what he is, genuine humility is not possible. Nor is repentance that leads to brokenness. The walls of self-protection and denial run deep.

Then there are other children who rebel because one or more of their parents have lost their moral authority due to hypocrisy and failures. A child whose father is unfaithful to the marriage, for example, will grow up with both anger toward the father and resentment toward the mother. Add a divorce into the mix, and you have created an environment in which spiritual rebellion flourishes.

A classic example of this is the Old Testament story of David. David committed the twin sins of adultery and murder, and as a result, lost all moral authority in his family. Absalom, though born into a royal family with a father whose psalms

of praise we still read today—*that* son, of *that* famous father, rebelled and died a shameful death.

Let's examine this story more closely.

Absalom had the misfortune of being drop-dead handsome (2 Sam. 14:25–26) with long, luxurious hair and a winning personality. He possessed a natural charm, which posed a temptation he could not resist. Such gifted children have many opportunities to be led astray by their vanity, their godless friends, and their sense of entitlement. They have a sense of pride, and if their expectations are not met, they retaliate with anger and self-justification.

Absalom was even more vulnerable to gross sin because he had no positive emotional connection with his father. When David's hidden sin became public knowledge, he lost his moral authority within the family, and for that matter, within his kingdom. From then on, David was passive, allowing sin to take root in his family without intervention. He still paid attention to the matters of his kingdom, but he neglected his family.

Absalom's anger was not without reason. He had a beautiful sister named Tamar who was sexually violated by his half-brother Amnon. What did their father, David, do about this evil within his family? We read that he was angry, but he did nothing (2 Sam. 13:21). When another of David's sons, Adonijah, plotted to be king in defiance of David's wishes, we read, "His father [David] had never at any time displeased

him by asking, “Why have you done thus and so?” (1 Kings 1:6). David was morally paralyzed because of his own sin; his lack of moral authority led to moral passivity even in the face of great evil within his family.

In a fit of rage, Absalom kills his half-brother Amnon to avenge what had been done to Tamar. Once Absalom pushed past this moral boundary, it was difficult for him to return to God and back to his father. Guilt, anger, and sexual pleasures drive a child away from God and home. “I hate my father, so I also hate my father’s God.”

Absalom’s goal now was to destroy his father so he could sit on his father’s throne. His sense of revenge and entitlement drove him to initiate a rebellion in which he died.

David might have been a great king, but he was a failure as a father.

Here is a lesson for parents.

David did return to God after his sin, and he again experienced the joy of his salvation (Ps. 51:12). Although a father may return to the Lord in repentance, his children might not. David lost four of his sons just as God predicted. Bathsheba’s first son died, as did three other sons: Amnon, Absalom, and Adonijah. Unresolved sin on the part of a father can lead to generational sin. Yes, David enjoyed forgiveness and renewed favor with God, but some of his children did not.

Could David have recouped his moral authority? Possibly, if he had not only repented before God but also before his

entire family. If he had admitted his shameful sin and requested their forgiveness, he might have reentered into the lives of his children with a sense of humility and honesty. That entrance into the heart of his children might have borne spiritual fruit. But it was not to be.

During those four Wednesday nights at The Moody Church, as I listened to parents' stories of their wayward children, I discovered that in many cases, the rebellious child grew up with a single parent, in a home in which there was divorce, resentment, or addiction. In other cases, the home was strict, where children were expected to obey parents whose authority was to be both respected and unquestioned, homes where abuse was seen as fair discipline.

Every mile children go off the trail is a mile for them to return. Job speaks about those who add "rebellion to their sin" (Job 34:37). But to the brokenhearted parent, I would say, "Don't give up hope!" Let God redeem your story. Rebellious children often do come back to God and to home. Never give up praying! And to the extent that you failed your child, humbly request their forgiveness.

I do not regard myself as a model father, but by God's grace, I have always tried to admit my failures to my children. When she was in her early twenties, our oldest daughter was asked what she liked most about me as her father. How did she answer? Did she say, "I love him because he is the pastor of a well-known church, has a radio program, and writes books?" No.

She replied, “What I appreciated most is that when he was wrong, he admitted it to us; he would ask our forgiveness if he wrongly disciplined us or had acted improperly.”

So, as parents, our first prayer should be to ask, “Lord, have I contributed to the problems my child is facing?” When we are totally honest before God, we might be surprised as to what God shows us. After all, there are no perfect parents, no perfect homes, and no perfect children. We must always begin with humility and repentance.

So, before we pray for our children we must ask, how are we as parents doing spiritually? Jim Cymbala, pastor of the Brooklyn Tabernacle, explains what parents must do to prevail in prayer:

A clear conscience and a pure heart are absolute necessities for prevailing prayer. I cannot confidently ask God for answers when I cling to the sins that nailed His Son to the cross of Calvary. I cannot live in iniquity and enjoy the Lord’s favor simultaneously. These are impossibilities in God’s moral universe.³

We must begin our prayers for our children with: “*Lord, change me!*”

A PRAYER WE ALL MUST PRAY

Father, You know my faults and failures better than I do. I know I have sometimes failed as a parent through my unacknowledged hypocrisy. Teach me the meaning of deep repentance and transparency in Your presence.

I echo the prayer of David, “Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!” (Ps. 139:23-24).

As I pray for my child, I pray for myself. Show me not only my failures and sins that have affected my family, but also show me how to restore the past as much as possible. Give me the wisdom I need to reach out to my children, to ask for forgiveness where appropriate, and to extend love where I have withheld it. I claim this promise, “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” (Ps. 51:17).

Father, I need Your wisdom in the days ahead.

In Jesus’ name, Amen.

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